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DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL EDUCATION IN WASHTENAW COUNTY

By Julius Haab
County Commissioner of Schools

Although in this period of international crisis, we cannot lose sight of the global concept, yet to us Washtenaw County will always be a little world within a world.

About two years ago, in order to stimulate a feeling of pride and interest in the community, I asked the pupils of our 129 rural schools, under the guidance of the teachers, to write up the histories of their respective districts. All the pupils participated in this project. However, the major responsibility for organizing and assembling the facts and pictures rested upon the pupils in the 7th and 8th grades. They served as captains, and used this project in local history to supplement their courses in history and civics in the regular school curriculum. The teachers acted in the capacity of chairmen and general advisors of the project. Information was gleaned from all available sources, such as old manuscript school records and pictures, present and former school officers and teachers, and elderly patrons of the district.

The enthusiasm with which teachers and pupils, as well as the people of the community, volunteered their services in preparing these histories was exceedingly gratifying. I was particularly pleased at the cooperative spirit manifested by many elderly persons who are products of our rural schools, their willingness to come to our schools and to our teachers' meetings and give us the benefit of their rich experience.

The history project culminated in two huge volumes totalling more than 500 pages, kept in custody by the office of the Commissioner of Schools. These books are a storehouse of treasure, a source-book of original information much of which would otherwise have been lost to posterity.

I am sure that, if you read the following excerpts selected here and there from these Washtenaw County rural school histories, you will recognize that the early log school-house of candle-stick days, with its straight benches and hand-hewed puncheons around the wall; the succeeding frame school-house of kerosene lamp days, with more comfortable seating and heating facilities; and the modern

school with electric lights, running water and automatic heat, stand out as three glowing mileposts of progress in the history of our county. We believe that our modern schools are an immeasureable improvement over those of pioneer days in standards of propriety, in instruction and supervision, and in physical equipment. Nevertheless, we must give our forefathers great credit for having provided what they considered adequate educational facilities at that time. They realized, as we do, that the most valuable assets of any community are the boys and girls. When the people of the Stone District, in 1825, could not even wait until the first log school was constructed, they hired a teacher to carry on classes under some giant oak trees. Here is evidence of the pioneers' unquenchable thirst for knowledge, their indomitable faith in the spirit of the Northwest Ordinance: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged!"

(The following excerpts appear in the children's own language. No editing has been done, only selecting and condensing. Our apologies to all those schools whose contributions are omitted. Our attempt is to give our readers representative "samplings" of particularly human-interest material.)

ANN ARBOR TOWNSHIP

Geddes School

In these early years there were two terms of school, a winter term of three months to be taught by a man for $15 per month and board, and a summer term of six months to be taught by a woman for $1.25 per week and board.

One note of interest in the first ledger book is that a scholar that neglects to furnish wood must pay 50 cents...There were no standard text books. The pupils studied whatever books they happened to have at home...Instead of completing 8 grades before leaving school they had to finish 3 Spellers and 4 Arithmetics, etc. There was a class in mental arithmetic which taught alertness...Readers were unattractive and hard to read because of small print, difficult words and meanings beyond the reader's mentality. Most stories were the moral type intended for a preachment.

BRIDGEWATER TOWNSHIP

Allen School

The children could take any subjects they wanted to. They weren't required to take certain subjects as we are today. All the children used slates. At night the children would put their slates in a pile on the teacher's desk to be corrected and have a copy written on them for writing practice the next day.

When schools were first started there weren't any text books. The children brought old books from home. Then a book salesman canvassed the schools and suggested how the teacher could get uniform text books. By this plan the children were to give their old books to the man from the company and in exchange they were to get a new text book plus an additional ten cents. The parents didn't like the idea of giving away books that had been handed down to them for generations.

BRIDGEWATER TOWNSHIP, cont.

Bridgewater Center School

Early equipment was little to say the least. Quite often children came to school with only their slates. Books were gradually added. In 1880 a world globe and a dictionary were purchased. Later the school received wall maps and readers.

The school district bought very few supplies for the teacher. Typical purchases for an average year included: one pound of chalk, two brooms, seven windows, and one tin cup. It seemed that every yearly bill included at least five window panes. Later the school district decided that those boys breaking windows must replace them. A box of glass was kept in the building for that purpose. There must have been difficulty getting each person's share of wood at the school. The school board early decided that if the required amount of wood was not corded at the school house by a certain date, it would be purchased and charged to the late person's tax bill.

Lancaster School

Some of our teachers became quite famous. Clarence Darrow was an early teacher here. He later became a great criminal lawyer having received his training at the University of Michigan. He became famous a few years ago as he tried the famous Loeb and Leopold case in Chicago.

DEXTER TOWNSHIP

Gallagher School

The school building was never erected on this site because, according to old settlers, Mr. Gallagher thought it would be too near his apple orchard thus making it very convenient for children to raid his crop. He therefore donated a tract of land a half mile north of the old building and that has since been used.

North Lake School

The first teacher in this school was Melissa S. Doane. Among the teachers listed is found that of Webster Pierce, who later became State Commissioner of Schools.

Spiegelberg School

Mr. Spiegelberg built our present school. It is 100 years old or older. The terms were from November to the middle of March. Then they would have a vacation until May. They would go to school from May through August. At one time during the summer 70 pupils attended the school. The ones that didn't have room inside the school would sit outside on benches when it wasn't stormy. Men teachers usually taught through the winter session.

One night after school Edward McGuiness and some other boys put a piece of chalk under the window. They did that so they could get into the school the same evening. That evening they climbed in the window and filled the room with snow about a foot deep...One day a boy named Berton Wright was chewing tobacco in school. There was a broken window near him and a knot hole in the floor. He would spit through the window and into the knot hole. He looked very funny...One day a pupil named Reuben Lindemann decided to smoke in school. He got some corn silk and smoked it. He became very sick. He hasn't smoked even to this day.

FREEDOM TOWNSHIP

Dresselhouse School

The following story is exactly as written by Mrs. Nordman in a letter she wrote to the school, "I taught my first school at the age of 13, would have been 14 in the fall. It happened like this. My grandmother asked me to ask the director, Mr. Dresselhouse, if my aunt could have the school and he said she could. When I told my aunt she said she had taken her school for the spring term. I said (in fun) Oh, I'll teach that school! and she said she thought I could. When I told my mother my older brother said, A little snip like you? - well, the result was they dressed me up and I got the school. I got $1 more per month than my aunt did. When they asked me how old I was I told them I wasn't 17 yet."

Kuebler School

At the time the school house was moved there was a heated discussion as to what color the building should be painted. One man in the district said that pigsties were painted red, and that the color of the school should not be the same color as that of a pigsty. It was thus decided to change the color of the school from red to gray.

Boys who could not behave themselves were placed in a round heating stove. Of course, this was not done if there was a fire. The girls were fastened up by their braids so that they could touch the floor with the tips of their toes only.

We found some interesting facts about some of the people who have lived in our district. James Hill became a member of the State Legislature. Adam Gehringer, the grandfather of Charles Gehringer, once lived in the house on Nathan Alber's farm.

Pleasant Lake School

In pioneer days the children on the way to school had to watch out for wolves who lived in the forest instead of watching for automobiles as we of today must do.

LIMA TOWNSHIP

Jerusalem School

The community was named Jerusalem by a group of children who were riding along in a sleigh. One of them, the late Mary Jenks, sister of Charles Jenks, now the oldest living resident of the School district, said, "Let's name the old mill Holy Jerusalem." The boys got out of the sleigh and wrote the name with chalk on the mill.

The heating was done with a box stove. Two-foot lengths of wood were always ordered...The children were warm because they wore woolen long-sleeved and long-legged underwear and home-knitted stockings. The boys wore felt boots and rubbers.

The children had to get water at a neighboring farm. They took turns passing the water pail and cup or dipper around the room in the morning and in the afternoon. Everyone used the same cup or dipper. It was not unusual to see crumbs of bread in the bottom of the pail as it was passed.

The teacher who could keep the best order was considered worth keeping, regardless of how much the children learned.

LIMA TOWNSHIP, cont.

Jewett Stone School

It was about this time (1854-55) that the present stone school was built...Thomas Jewett, well known for his carpentry, did the wood work finishing...He is quoted as having said he put the partitions in the seats "so the little devils couldn't crowd each other out of the seats." Some of the older boys, who were nearly grown men, objected having the partitions, and during the absence of the teacher one noon they used the axe, and some of the partitions didn't last very long.

Some remarks made by early teachers, taken from the old attendance records: "This is a good school for one thing, we have lots of company. It is an easy school to get entertainments up in." Miss Belle Chandler, 1891. "All of the scholars are good about one thing, when anyone comes in to the school they mind their own business and do not gaze at them."

LODI TOWNSHIP

Dold School

If a girl could read, write, and do arithmetic she was considered to have an education. The people in those days did not think that a girl would need an education.

Lodi Center School

As soon as the home was built to protect them from the elements of nature, which we know were relentless at times, these rugged God-fearing people turned their thoughts to an education for their children.

The teachers were obliged to segregate the often unfriendly pupils by requiring the Irish children to sit on one side of the room and the German children on the other.

There are three mended places in the floor far to the right of the room and we had often wondered what had been the object of them. We learned from Mr. Kress that when boys who went to school 50 years ago had a yearning to chew tobacco they just simply chewed. Finding no place for the juice of the tobacco they put holes into the floor and made paper funnels and inserting the funnels, they were able to keep from having the stomach ache by spitting the juice into the funnels.

LYNDON TOWNSHIP

Canfield School

The only kind of entertainment in the early years of this school were spelling bees...After a few years the spelling bees changed to debates between the different schools. Pumpkin College was always an exciting opponent for Canfield in these contests. These debates were called "Lyceums." One popular question for debate then as now was: "Resolved, The Best Place to Live is the Country Rather Than the City."

LYNDON TOWNSHIP, cont.

Lakeview School

This history project has been much fun and very educational. We especially enjoyed talking to the old people for they told us many of their experiences which we have not written but will always remember. We only hope that we can remember our experiences as well so as to help other boys and girls when we are old and live in the past.

Pumpkin College School

The origin of the name of the school is undetermined. The most likely story is that a young pupil drew a picture of a pumpkin on the building. Another story is that in the old log building lived an old man who called on the teacher. His head was bald and the pupils called him "Pumpkin-head," Another is the building is near a pumpkin field, and when two men were shingling the school, one asked who went to this school, the other answered "Pumpkins." Still another story says that one summer a pumpkin vine grew in the window and a ripe pumpkin grew on the end of it, and when school started that fall the children called it "Pumpkin College."

MANCHESTER TOWNSHIP

West Clinton School

An important event was the spelling bee. People would drive for miles in lumber wagons to attend one of these bees. A champion speller was looked upon with great respect. Sometimes these bees would last for hours because people really studied to be champions. At one spelling bee it began to look as if neither of the last two contenders would be "spelled down." Finally the teacher in desperation turned to the girl and said, "Spell the red rover of the world in three letters." The girl sat down and her opponent won by spelling f-o-x.

NORTHFIELD TOWNSHIP

Flintoft School

Some prominent men who attended our school were George Burke, Ann Arbor attorney, who graduated with the 8th grade class in 1899; and Francis O'Brien, another Ann Arbor attorney, who graduated with the 8th grade class of 1921.

Sutton School

Some of the distinguished men who received their early education at the Sutton School were Judge L. Horrigan, of Memphis, Tenn., Dr. John Kapp, a former mayor of Ann Arbor, his brother, Dr. C. Kapp of Manchester, and Dr. L. Shurtleff.

The Allens and Suttons came together as far as Plymouth, they parted there and the Allens went on to Ann Arbor, the Suttons here. The Suttons cut a road through to Ann Arbor so they and the Allens could visit together. One of Benjamin Sutton's daughters married an Allen.

NORTHFIELD TOWNSHIP, cont.

Welch's Corners School

An incident which furnished one of the rare bits of excitement in those usually quiet stable times was the disclosure of a counterfeit hide-out on the farm now owned by Mr. Thompson a mile east of the schoolhouse. The men eluded suspicion for some time, by confining their activities in a granary and would shovel wheat against the door when leaving their "office."

PITTSFIELD TOWNSHIP

Carpenter School

There is a story that happened many years ago. One of the pupils that went to Carpenter School did not like the seat he had to sit in. Mr. Gibbs, an old settler, told the boy that if he ever had any extra money he was going to have new seats put in the school. When this boy had grown up and made his fortune he left in his will $500 for new seats for Carpenter School. Now the school has these seats and they are very comfortable.

Mills School

The first school in this district was taught by Miss Susan Olds during the summer of 1832, in the old Mills House on the Ann Arbor and Saline Road...The first teacher in the present school was E. C. Warner, father of Representative Joe Warner of Ypsilanti.

Stone School

The first settlers in this territory surrounding the Stone School took up the land from the United States Government in 1825. They came from Connecticut. The little colony was known as the Mallett's Creek Settlement...The township was named for William Pitt.

The first schoolhouse in Washtenaw County was built by the people of this settlement in 1825...Miss Harriet G. Parsons, from Enfield, Connecticut, was the first teacher in this building. The first school in the County was not held in a building. During the summer, before the school was built, Elzada Fairbrother taught a group of children in an open air meeting place under some oak trees in a woods east of what is now the Nordman Farm.

SALEM TOWNSHIP

Lapham Corners School

No health was taught. Gum was passed from one child to another, or a selfish child would save his a week or longer...The walls were dark so as not to show smoke.

Salem Stone School

The Bullock's Corners School (the opposite corner from where the schoolhouse now stands) was built of unhewn logs and was hardly six feet from the floor to ceiling, with a six-light window in each of the three sides. The seats were slabs set upon wooden pins. It was heated by a small box stove, which was considered a vast improvement upon the fireplace common in most schools...In arithmetic the multiplication tables were taught through the fourteens.

SALEM TOWNSHIP, cont.

Salem Union School

George Wheeler, son of Calvin Wheeler, was a prominent merchant of Salem. In 1868 he was Superintendent of Schools for Washtenaw County for 6 years.

The schoolhouse was erected in 1885. A great deal was said at that time that it would not stand the high winds because it was so high and narrow.

Wash Oak School

Mr. Deake is one of seventeen children all of whom went through this school. His sister started school when she was two. She came so that her parents wouldn't have so many children to tend to at home.

They hauled water from half a mile away. Sometimes they would purposely stub their toes when they got back to the corner of the schoolhouse and would have to go get a pailful again.

SALINE TOWNSHIP

Gleason School

The teacher was paid 75¢ for a week of 6 days and boarded round at the different homes. Quoted from the Saline Observer for Sept. 9, 1837: "When the teacher asked for Saturday off there was a great argument about the matter. Some felt she would not earn her money if she had a day off, some thought it rather indolent of her and she was getting lazy, some thought they should demand the full week's work. A compromise was reached and the teacher was given one Saturday a month for a holiday. Later it was one Saturday every two weeks. Gradually the idea grew and the 5-day week was decided upon.

SCIO TOWNSHIP

Delhi School

The village of Delhi was first surveyed in 1836 under the name of Michigan Village. Some time later the name was changed to Doremusville in honor of the man who platted the village and who owned most of the land. The ladies of Doremusville were not pleased with the name. Many names were submitted, and Mrs. Boyden, having in mind the picturesque dells and hills which surround the valley, suggested the name of Delhi.

The village has always been regarded as a model with respect to morality and good order. One of the conditions made to every deed to each lot sold was that no intoxicating drinks should ever be sold upon the premises, under forfeiture of the lot and all improvements made thereon. Thus the great promoter of vice and immorality has never been permitted entrance to the village.

SHARON TOWNSHIP

Davidter School

January 24, 1838. The following votes were taken and passed: That the sum of $12 be raised to pay back expenses and replace uncurrent money. That the District Board obtain uncurrent money and dispose of it to best advantage. That the schoolhouse be free for

SHARON TOWNSHIP, Davidter School, cont.

religious meetings of all denominations...(1856) That $33 be raised to build a board fence around the school lot, of pine boards 6 inches wide and 12 feet long and 1 inch thick and 5 boards high with a cap on the top. There are to be 3 nails in each board where it crosses the post...That (1871) no forrin scholars be allowed in District 2. That the parents be held responsible for all damage done to school by their children.

Dorr School

A pioneer relates that the seats were so high from the floor that we sat and swung our feet by the hour as they could not touch the floor if we sat in the deep high seats. Many naps were taken by the little ones with a coat for a pillow, because all must stay until 4 o'clock.

There were no blinds at the little-paned windows, and when Hattie Irvin taught there she made shades of newspaper, cutting artistic designs of flowers and birds. Over each window she placed a motto on white paper with a blue frame. Some were: "Order is Heaven's First Law," "Try, try again," and "Honesty is the Best Policy."

Everett School

The school's water supply used to be from Franklin Everett's pantry. The children considered it a great pleasure to take the pail, always two at a time, and pump the water in his cellar. All drank from one dipper and most of the pupils lived long lives; many are still living in spite of that common dipper. In 1933, while Anna Farley taught here, a flowing well was curbed with a bubbler and we now enjoy running water inside the class room.

SUPERIOR TOWNSHIP

Bennett School

At that time anyone who was not a graduate of some college or normal and who wished to teach school had to appear before the Township Inspector and pass a satisfactory test...Sad to say many of these inspectors were rather uneducated men and in many cases knew much less than the teacher. Much to the amusement of the children, the Township Inspector used sometimes to try to teach some of the classes. Spelling classes were not usually too difficult for them, because by carefully watching the text they could tell whether the child had correctly spelled the word. But reading classes were another story, because sometimes words would appear beyond the ken of the Inspector. One Inspector who visited Bennett School called on them to "read the next stanza," when it was prose they were reading. Another time he gave them an arithmetic problem he was sure would have them "stumped completely," when it was so simple they gave him the answer immediately without pencils.

Dixboro School

The village of Dixboro was named after its founder, Captain John Dix. He was a sea captain in Boston. When he retired he was quite welathy and came west and bought land near Fleming's Creek. It was platted in 1846, with a reserve of 16 rods by 8 for a public square. The school and church were to be situated in the square, however the church was not built in it.

SUPERIOR TOWNSHIP, cont.

Gale School

In the oldest school records obtained (1881), Belle Lambie Scotney was the teacher. In those days a teacher received her certificate by taking an oral examination from the county examiner. Many times the examiner had little or no schooling. When Mrs. Scotney took her examination the examiner had the questions on one sheet of paper and the answers on another kept out of sight. He got the answers mixed and marked her off ten points for the correct answers. However, she got her certificate and also the school...She was such a good teacher little Walter Hiscock's mother sent him at three and she taught him how to talk.

Geer School

Old-fashioned husking bees were enjoyed by all during the fall months. There were contests to see who could husk the most corn, and lucky for the young man who found a red ear of corn as he had his choice to kiss any young lady. Refreshments were cider and doughnuts.

SYLVAN TOWNSHIP

Riemenschneider School

A pupil who attended the school had to furnish his share of the wood. If he didn't do this he had to sit in the back of the room where it was cold. The teacher was paid in grain, vegetables, fruit or anything that could be used.

For writing, slates and slate pencils were used. When the pupils wanted to erase, they would spit on their slate and rub it off with their sleeves.

WEBSTER TOWNSHIP

Merrill School

The school was organized in 1836...Winthrop Merrill was made director, and Hiram Mason secretary and moderator. The first school was about a half mile east of the present building, on the south side of Whitmore Lake Road. The open space may still be seen where the log building stood. The motto adopted by the two officers was "Bread First; Education Next." This school for many years had the reputation of being the best district school in Washtenaw County. Not only the common branches were taught but also algebra, geometry, physics, physiology, and United States history. (Note: Believe me, those teachers had to know their stuff.) The University of Michigan used to accept students into the Law and Medical Schools without examination if they had attended the Merrill School regularly during winters, and were of the proper age.

Four of the Merrill sisters taught the old Merrill School: Susan, Julia, Emily, and Frances. Sister Julia was teaching the winter term of 1860-61. The following young men pupils of hers enlisted in the Civil War, Third Michigan Cavalry, at the close of that term: Joseph Todd, 21, Harrison Olsaver, 21, Albert Mason, 20, and Frank Voight, 21.

YORK TOWNSHIP

Mooreville School

Early teachers in this district were women. Later, when the older boys tried to "run the school" men teachers were hired. There is a memory of a one-armed man teacher who rode horseback from Saline to school each day. Under the short arm he carried a rawhide whip. When a boy would not behave he would be invited to take off his coat. If the coat was not removed the teacher would do it for him. A few lashes would bring the needed discipline. Two teachers had been turned out that same year, but the one-armed teacher stayed.

York Townline School

The enrollment varied from 75 to 100. At times the school was literally packed. The ages of the children ranged from 5 to 20 years. Hardly a day passed that the teacher did not have a tussle with one of the big boys, and often the teacher was tossed out of the window or the door.

YPSILANTI TOWNSHIP

Begole School

In 1890 Phil Watling was the only student. His teacher would come to the corner of Michigan Avenue and Ellsworth roads, and if Phil were not in sight she would go home.

In later years, when there was a lot of water across Ellsworth Road in the spring, Phil Watling carried the other children across because he was the biggest.

Rawsonville School

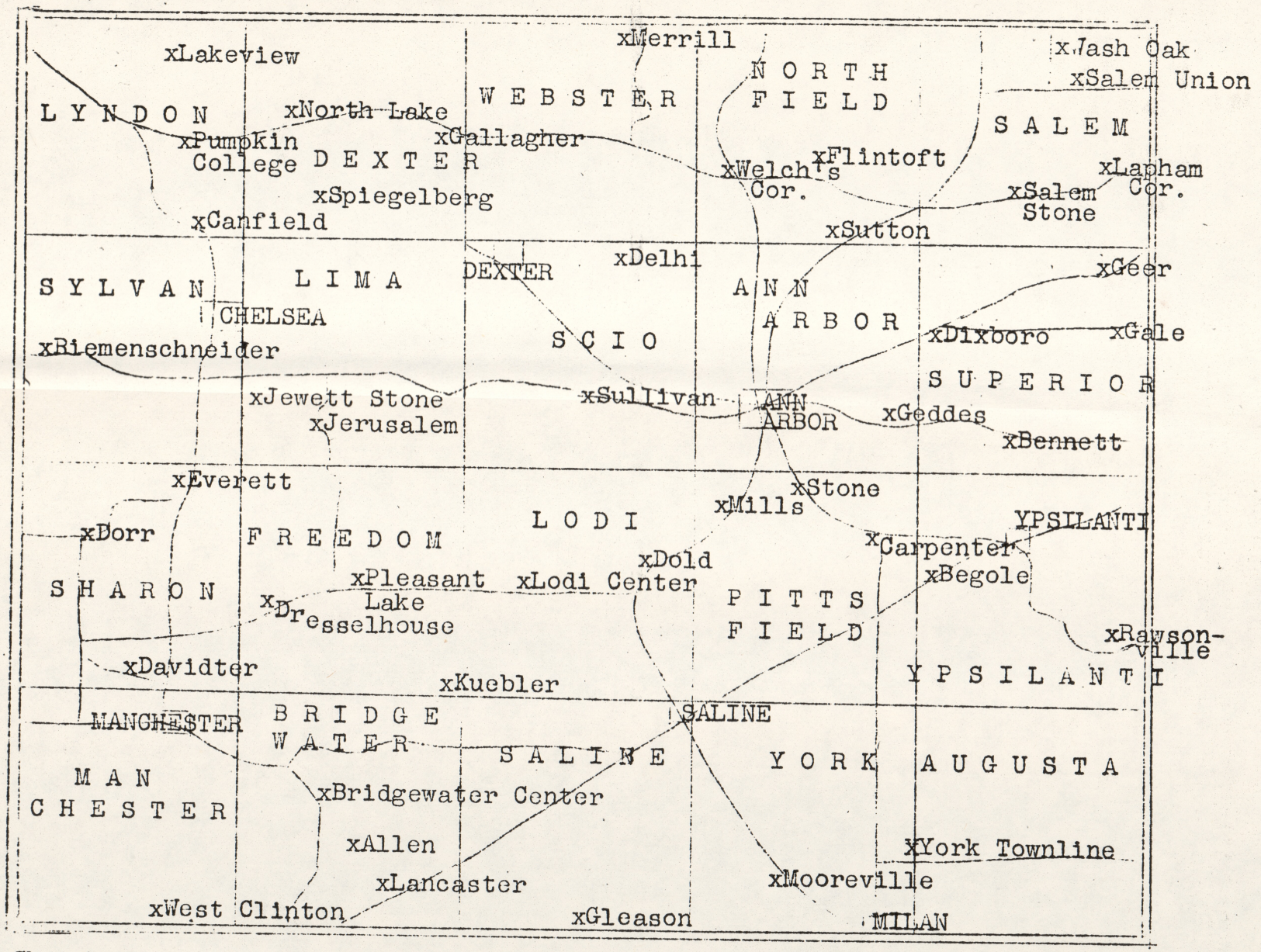
About 1800 a man named Henry Snow landed at the present site of Rawsonville; it was then called Snow's Landing. Ten years later it was named Michigan City. After Ambline Rawson came here with his father in 1825, it was named Rawsonville.

In 1850, when more people started settling in Rawsonville, there was a need for mills. There were three, all on the south side of the river: a woolen mill, a grist mill, and a lumber mill. The woolen mill employed 100 hands. There was a cheese factory on the southern hill and a distilling plant at the bottom of west hill.

At this time Ypsilanti was called Woodruff Grove and was smaller than Rawsonville. Later the railroad, which they were going to build through Rawsonville, missed it and went through four miles north, to Ypsilanti. After that people took their grain and other produce to Ypsilanti to be sent away by railroad. Then people moved away to find work in other places. Rawsonville gradually decreased in population until now there are only a few families living on the original site. Most of the houses have disappeared.

Henry Ford is now building an airplane factory near Rawsonville and the Ford workers are moving into the subdivision at the top of the north hill. The increase in population already has caused a new school to be built at the top of the hill. The future looks bright for Rawsonville.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
June 28, 1943



Sketch Map of Washtenaw County, Michigan, Showing Rural School Referred to in this paper.